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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 007088

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: THE BJP HAS FEW OPTIONS TO RETURN TO POWER

REF: A. NEW DELHI 6998

- [1](#)B. NEW DELHI 6606
- [1](#)C. NEW DELHI 5339
- [1](#)D. NEW DELHI 4036
- [1](#)E. NEW DELHI 3333

Classified By: PolCouns Geoffrey Pyatt, Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Since losing the May elections, the BJP leadership has failed to resolve internal disputes between its moderate and Hindutva wings over the reasons for its defeat. The Sangh (family of Hindu groups) is urging the party to return to its Hindutva roots, but the leadership is unwilling to endorse this course. Party President and former DPM Advani is leaning towards "moderate Hindutva" as a means to placate the Sangh and keep secular parties in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Although determined to confront the UPA both inside and outside of Parliament, the BJP cannot return to power over the medium term, and poses no serious threat to the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Both the NDA and UPA are concentrating on three state elections slated for February 2005, which could consolidate Congress momentum according to early predictions. Should the BJP do badly in these contests, the UPA could remain in power for years to come. End Summary.

Confusion Still Reigns

[1](#)2. (U) On October 18, the BJP sacked party President Venkaiah Naidu, and replaced him with former DPM L.K. Advani (Ref B). Press reports indicate that the BJP hopes Advani will provide strong leadership, overcome deep rifts in the party leadership, and lead it back to power. In an early indication as to which direction he wants to take the party, Advani committed the BJP to building a Ram temple in Ayodhya on October 26, met RSS leaders for two hours on October 31, and pledged to attend a hard-line RSS leadership conference on November 5 and 6 in Hardwar.

[1](#)3. (U) Indications are that the party's internal rifts remain as deep as ever. On November 1, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader Ashok Singal criticized Advani as a "stop-gap" president who lacked mass appeal, and the Sangh Parivar leadership said it would accept nothing less than a return to Hindutva ideology. Despite its unhappiness with the BJP's failure to return to Hindutva, the Sangh Parivar gave no indication that it would follow through on earlier threats to form a purely Hindu party. On October 31, a disaffected RSS activist revived the old Jan Sangh as a new Hindu nationalist grouping, but no BJP leaders joined him.

Limited Options

[1](#)4. (C) On November 4, well-connected television journalist Harish Gupta told Poloff that the RSS wants Advani to give up aspirations of a quick return to power, to allow the UPA government to complete a full five-year term, and to use that period to rebuild the party from the ground up. According to Gupta, Advani is reluctant to accept this plan, as it would prevent him from becoming PM. If the party adopted this approach, it would have to select an heir apparent from its second tier leadership. The two most likely candidates are Murli Manohar Joshi and Sushma Swaraj, both of whom are hard-liners who enjoy the confidence of the Sangh Parivar

[1](#)5. (C) Gupta claimed that Joshi was the Sangh Parivar's first choice to become party president and Advani was happy to remain leader of the parliamentary opposition, taking the job only to prevent Joshi's rise to power. Gupta predicted that Advani would fare badly in the post, as the BJP's current options are extremely limited, and that he would take the blame for a situation in which there is little prospect for a positive outcome.

[1](#)6. (C) Gupta pointed out that Bihar and Jharkhand go to the polls in February 2005, and because the BJP has no presence there, it must rely on its ally the Janata Dal(U), headed by former Defense Minister George Fernandes to carry the NDA's water. The strongly secular Fernandes objected to Advani's pro Hindutva tilt and comments regarding the Ram temple, setting off speculation that his party could leave the NDA. This leaves Advani trapped between the Sangh Parivar and the NDA's secular allies, with no easy choice between the two.

Deep Divisions

17. (C) The BJP itself remains deeply divided and in no shape to present a serious challenge to the UPA government. Advani's public stance indicates that he hopes to unite the party around a "moderate Hindutva" orientation aimed at pleasing the Sangh Parivar while not alienating moderates led by Arun Jaitley, Pramod Mahajan, and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi. Advani is counting on the help of Joshi and Sushma Swaraj, who are ascendant. However, both Joshi and Swaraj want to become PM. Until the party agrees on its next PM candidate, it will be plagued by continued distrust and rivalry within its top leadership.

But Determined to Confront the UPA

18. (C) Despite its weaknesses and string of electoral defeats, the BJP remains determined to confront the UPA, even on economic reform where there is no substantive disagreement. In a November 1 meeting with the Ambassador (Ref A), BJP Rajya Sabha leader Jaswant Singh bristled at the personal attacks by the UPA has been leveling against the BJP leadership and what it views as UPA efforts to purge the bureaucracy of civil servants with BJP sympathies. Singh also disparaged PM Manmohan Singh's abilities and described the cabinet as a "disaster."

19. (SBU) Advani and other BJP parliamentary leaders confirmed this private stance, telling the press that the party will confront the UPA on the floor of parliament on a long laundry list of issues including: "tainted ministers," the UPA's handling of terrorism in J&K, and the government's handling of domestic security, which Party spokesman Naqvi characterized as "the worst since Independence."

110. (U) Although the BJP will confront the UPA in Parliament, it is also planning to change its tactics. Advani told the party leadership that the previous disruptions were "counterproductive," and that the party was determined to conduct no more walkouts and boycotts. Advani characterized these as "mistakes," saying "I don't think it will happen again." However, speaking at a November 5 conference, party leader and former Law Minister Arun Jaitley made clear that the BJP would not apologize for introducing parliamentary gridlock that makes it difficult for the UPA to pursue a substantive agenda.

No Good Options

11. (C) Although the BJP will continue to lock horns with Congress, there is little to indicate that this will benefit the party, as there is no clear option under which the BJP could quickly return to power. The BJP and its NDA allies do not currently have the numbers to bring down the government through defection, or a vote of no-confidence, and are not strong enough to defeat the UPA in an election.

112. (C) The Left/Communists can bring down the government by withdrawing their support, but this would not benefit the BJP, because it does not have enough allies to put together an alternative. The Communists would only leave the UPA after forging a third front with other Left-oriented parties such as the Janata Dal(U) of Bihar and the Samajwadi Party(SP) of Uttar Pradesh (UP), led by Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav. As a sworn enemy of the Left, the BJP could never join or support such a grouping.

113. (C) The Sangh Parivar leadership argues that the BJP should stop attempting to strengthen the NDA by pandering to secular parties, and instead ally only with the Shiv Sena and those parties willing to accept its Hindutva agenda. Should Advani accept this proposal, it would further weaken the NDA by causing most secular parties to leave the alliance, postponing the day when it can return to power. Should he reject it, the increasingly disaffected Sangh Parivar could withdraw its support, which is crucial to the BJP's grass roots organization.

The Importance of State Elections

114. (C) The NDA and the UPA are now focused on the February elections in Jharkhand, Bihar, and Haryana, as they will be indicative of which grouping is generating political momentum. Congress sees these state victories as a crucial step towards its goal of gaining sufficient strength to call new elections, win a Parliamentary majority and form a government without the Communists. Most political observers agree that as soon as Congress is strong enough, it will call new elections.

115. (C) In order to blunt UPA momentum, the BJP/NDA needs to demonstrate to the Indian voter that it is gathering strength

and can present a serious electoral challenge to Congress. Should the NDA fare badly in these state elections, it will lose momentum, leading to more divisions, increasing criticism of Advani and more calls by the Sangh Parivar to embrace a Hindu nationalist ideology and agenda.

Comment

16. (C) India's key political players -- the BJP/NDA, the Congress/UPA and the Communists -- are all vying for position, with trends favoring Congress. However, none of the three groupings has sufficient strength to rule on its own, and the BJP cannot bring down the government or bring on a new election. Although the BJP will engage in noisy disputes with the UPA on a number of issues in the coming months, they are unlikely to have much impact, aside from slowing legislation. With the BJP distracted by deep divisions and immersed in its internal affairs, Congress has an opportunity to convince the electorate that it has the ability to rule effectively. Facing no serious short-term political challenge from the BJP, Congress could only provide its BJP rivals an opening by failing to perform up to expectations.

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